



Roper Public Affairs



**NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC**

Education Foundation

Executive Summary

National Geographic-Roper Public Affairs 2006 Geographic Literacy Study

Prepared for:

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I. Introduction

A. Purpose of the Poll

The National Geographic – Roper Public Affairs 2006 Geographic Literacy Study assesses the geographic knowledge of young American adults between the ages of 18 and 24. The survey also asks respondents how much they think they know about geography and other subjects, and their views on the importance of geographic, technological and cultural knowledge in today's world.

The 2006 study is the latest in a series of surveys commissioned by the National Geographic Society, with the most recent previous wave being conducted in 2002. Past surveys found that Americans between the ages of 18 and 24 have a poor grasp of geography skills and knowledge. In the four years since the last survey, the world has witnessed significant events including the Iraq War and the Darfur crisis in Sudan. In the past year and a half alone, we have seen the power and the aftermath of natural disasters including the Indian Ocean tsunami, the earthquake in Pakistan, and Hurricane Katrina.

B. Geographic Literacy

This survey was designed to test the geographic skills and knowledge of young adults. Three kinds of questions are used to gauge geographic know-how. First, there is a series of questions on factual knowledge of important events and issues in the news. In this year's survey, these questions cover topics such as population sizes and growth, trade, and natural disasters. Second, a map of a hypothetical location is used to test respondents' skills in basic map reading. Third, a set of actual maps – three international and one of the continental United States – are used to gauge respondents' ability find specific countries regularly in the news and significant natural landmarks. Combined, the 2006 National Geographic study allows a look into young Americans' attitudes toward and capabilities in geographic knowledge – essential tools for living and succeeding in an increasingly interconnected world.

C. Methodology

The National Geographic-Roper Public Affairs 2006 Geographic Literacy Study assesses the geographic knowledge of young adults in the continental United States. In total, 510 interviews were conducted with a representative sample of 18- to 24-year old adults in the continental United States, using an in-home, in-person methodology.

Interviews were conducted from December 17, 2005 to January 20, 2006.

Interviews lasted an average of 26.8 minutes.

A full description of the sampling methodology and procedures and a copy of the questionnaire used in the study are provided in the Appendix.

D. About This Report

The findings in this survey cover 510 respondents between the ages of 18 and 24. The terms “young adults” and “young Americans” refer to this group. The margin of error for the total sample is +/- 4.4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level.

All differences noted between any subgroups (e.g., respondents of different education levels, genders, those who do vs. do not use the Internet for news, those who do vs. do not travel internationally, etc.) are also significant at the 95% confidence level.

II. Executive Summary

A. *Highlights*

Americans are far from alone in the world, but from the perspective of many young Americans, we might as well be. On this survey, most young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 demonstrate a limited understanding of the world beyond their country's borders, and they place insufficient importance on the basic geographic skills that might enhance their knowledge. In this survey, young Americans answer about half (54%) of all the questions correctly. But by and large, majorities of young adults fail at a range of questions testing their basic geographic literacy.

There is some good news. For instance, respondents have a fairly good understanding of how to use a map for simple navigation tasks, and many can say on which continents different countries and significant natural landmarks are found. They accurately recall a number of timely facts, such as the Asian origins of the current strain of avian influenza.

However, survey results show cause for concern. Six in ten (63%) cannot find Iraq on a map of the Middle East, despite near-constant news coverage since the U.S. invasion of March 2003. Three-quarters cannot find Indonesia on a map – even after images of the tsunami and the damage it caused to this region of the world played prominently across television screens and in the pages of print media over many months in 2005. Three-quarters (75%) of young men and women do not know that a majority of Indonesia's population is Muslim (making it the largest Muslim country in the world), despite the prominence of this religion in global news today. Neither wars nor natural disasters appear to have compelled majorities of young adults to absorb knowledge about international places in the news.

Also striking is young Americans' ignorance of how the United States fits into the wider world. Majorities overestimate the total size of the U.S. population and fail to understand how much larger the population of China is. Three-quarters (74%) believe English is the most commonly spoken native language in the world, rather than Mandarin Chinese. Although 73% know the U.S. is the world's largest consumer of oil, nearly as many (71%) do not know the U.S. is the world's largest exporter of goods and services – half think it's China.

Such lack of geographic literacy shows up closer to home, as well. Half or fewer of young men and women 18-24 can identify the states of New York or Ohio on a map (50% and 43%, respectively).

Moreover, their lack of knowledge does not seem particularly alarming to many young Americans. Half think it is "important but not absolutely necessary" either to know where countries in the news are located (50%) or to be able to speak a foreign language (47%) – and six in ten (62%)

young Americans cannot speak a second language fluently (38% report being able to speak one or more non-native languages “fluently”). Indeed, young adults are far more likely to say speaking a foreign language is “not too important” (38%) than to say it is “absolutely necessary” (14%).

On a positive note, however, young Americans have access to a potentially important tool for improving geographic knowledge and understanding: the Internet. Eight in ten (80%) young adults have been on the Internet within the past month, and majorities say computer and Internet skills are “absolutely necessary” in today’s world (60% and 56%, respectively). This is significant because use of the Internet to follow news about current events worldwide is positively associated with young Americans’ performance on the quiz. While still small (27%), the percentage of young adults who turn to the Web for world news has more than doubled in just the last four years (11% in 2002).

Taken together, these results suggest that young people in the United States – the most recent graduates of our educational system – are unprepared for an increasingly global future. Far too many lack even the most basic skills for navigating the international economy or understanding the relationships among people and places that provide critical context for world events.

B. Noteworthy Results

What Young Americans Know About the World

- Despite near-constant news coverage of conflict in the Middle East, young Americans have a **weak knowledge of the geography of this region**. Six in ten (63%) cannot find Iraq or Saudi Arabia on a map of the Middle East, while three-quarters (75%) cannot find Iran or Israel. In fact, 44% cannot find even one of these four countries.
 - Results are linked to educational attainment: Young Americans with college experience are nearly four times as likely as those with only up to a high school education to be able to find all four of these countries (23% vs. 6%) – but still, fewer than one in five (14%) young people with at least some college education know enough about the geography of the Middle East to find these four strategic countries.
- Other **hot spots in the news** around the world also **fail to register** with 18- to 24-year-olds...
 - Nine in ten (88%) cannot find Afghanistan on a map of Asia.
 - Sizeable percentages do not know that Sudan and Rwanda are in Africa (54% and 40% answer incorrectly, respectively). In fact, 20% place Sudan in Asia and 10% put it in Europe.
 - Seven in ten (70%) cannot find North Korea on a map, and two-thirds (63%) do not know its border with South Korea is the most heavily fortified in the world.
- ...Even **natural disasters appear to have limited impact** on young Americans' awareness of the world.
 - Only a third (35%) correctly choose Pakistan from four possible choices as the country hit by a catastrophic earthquake in October 2005, killing over 70,000 people;¹ 29% think it was in Sri Lanka – these respondents are likely confusing the earthquake with the December 2004 tsunami.
 - Two-thirds (67%) can find Louisiana on a U.S. map and half (52%) can find Mississippi – leaving a third or more who cannot find these states, in spite of months of intensive media coverage of the 2005 hurricanes and their aftermath.
 - Moreover, half (50%) cannot find New York State, even though it is the third most populous state in the union, after California and Texas.
- Seven in ten (69%) young Americans can find China on a map – it is one of the few recognized countries outside North America. Yet even with a country as economically

¹ The death toll from the Pakistan earthquake cited here was correct at the time this survey was fielded.

and politically dominant as China, young Americans have **a number of misconceptions about China.**

- Although a plurality (45%) says China's population is only twice that of the U.S., it is actually four times as great.
 - Even when quizzed via a multiple choice format, few (18%) know Mandarin Chinese is the most widely spoken native language in the world; 74% say it is English;
 - Half (48%) think China – and not the U.S. – is the world's largest exporter in dollar value.
- Young Americans appear to stick close to home, reporting **limited contact with other cultures outside the U.S.**
 - Three-quarters (74%) have traveled to another state in the past year, but seven in ten (70%) have not traveled abroad at all in the past three years.
 - Six in ten (62%) cannot speak a second language “fluently.”
 - Nine in ten (89%) do not correspond regularly with anyone outside the U.S.
 - Only two in ten (22%) have a passport.

Geographic Literacy: Skills and Attitudes

- Half say **map reading skills are “absolutely necessary”** in today's world.
- Many can follow through on a functional level. On this survey, majorities of young adults can use a map for simple navigation tasks.
 - Three-quarters (76%) can find a port city on a fictitious map, based on indicators such as the convergence of roads and location on the waterfront.
 - Two-thirds (66%) recognize that the direction from Japan to Australia is south.
- Although they have some functional skills, some young Americans lack the basic practical skills necessary for safety and employment in today's world.
 - One-third (34%) would go in the wrong direction in the event of an evacuation.
 - As many – one-third (32%) – would miss a conference call scheduled with colleagues in another time zone.
- Yet while many young Americans **know how to use a map, this doesn't mean they know more about their country and the world.**
 - 21% say it's “not too important” to know where countries in the news are located.
 - Young Americans are not consistently able to identify countries and significant natural landmarks around the world.
 - 38% consider speaking another language to be “not too important.”
 - Language skills are seen as no more important now than they were in the 2002 study (39% “not too important”).

- Yet **technological skills are seen as more essential than ever**. Majorities say computer and Internet skills are “absolutely necessary.”
 - Eight in ten young adults have been online within the past month.
 - The percentage who use the Internet for news on current events around the world has more than doubled since 2002 (from 11% in 2002 to 27% in 2006).
 - This increased use of Internet news appears to have occurred without a drop in the number using more traditional media.
- Young Americans who go online for news about worldwide current events, and those who use two or more different news media demonstrate a greater knowledge of geographic issues.

C. Factors Correlated with Better Performance

Geographic Skills Stronger Among Those with Higher Education

Throughout the survey, the more education respondents have, the more likely they are to answer questions on geographic literacy correctly. Young adults with at least some college education are better informed than those with up to a high school diploma only, and those who are currently studying know more than non-students. People with college experience answered an average of 33.4 questions correctly (out of a possible 53), compared to 24.1 for people with up to a high school education and 28.6 for all 18- to 24-year olds. Likewise, students answered an average of 31.4 questions right, versus 26.5 for non-students.

This difference between high school and college educated respondents is not simply a reflection of age. Age is less of a factor than might be expected, with no significant difference in overall performance between 18-20 year olds and 21-24 year olds (averaging 27.6 and 29.5 correct answers, respectively). When looking for ways to explain how much people know, education is a much stronger and more consistent predictor of geographic knowledge and awareness than age.

Going Online to Get News is Correlated with More Geographic Know-How

Internet usage among 18- to 24-year-olds is higher now than in the 2002 poll (80%, up from 60%), and more than twice as many now turn to the Internet for news about current events around the world (27%, up from 11%). Although Internet use spans this age group, young Americans who specifically use the Internet for news about global events are much more likely than the average to have at least some college education (72%), and 55% are currently full-time students.

Moreover, using online news is correlated with better performance even among better educated people. Among people with at least some college education, 40% use the Internet to access news from around the world (versus 14% of those with up to a high school education). This group performs significantly better on this survey (averaging 36.8 correct questions) than college-educated respondents who do not read online news (average 31.2 correct).

Two Media Sources are Better than One.

The Internet appears to be supplementing, rather than replacing, traditional news sources like television. And the greater the number of media sources people use for news, the more they know about geography. Throughout the survey, respondents who use two or more media sources give the right answer more often (averaging 31.6 correct answers) than those who only use one news source (26.2). More avid news gatherers (2+ sources) are also more likely to:

- Have at least some college education (60% vs. 38% of those using one source);
- Have a passport, and have used it to travel abroad within the past three years.

People Who Say They Know More About Geography...Do Know More

When asked to evaluate their own knowledge of geography versus that of the average person, young Americans who say they know "more" than the average person – and who thus appear to

have a relatively greater interest in geography – do better on this survey. Young adults who say they know “more” about geography answer an average of 33.8 questions correctly (vs. 28.6 for all 18- to 24-year olds).

There is also a significant relation between quiz performance and owning maps *other than a street map*. Map owners, who tend to be more educated than those without maps, do better on questions using a map of a hypothetical location, as well as on finding real locations on U.S. and international maps.

Young adults who have taken a course dedicated to geography in middle or high school are more likely than those who haven't to say they know “more” than others about geography (34% vs. 22%), and they tend to go online more often (86% vs. 75%).

Men Outperform Women, Despite Education Parity

As in the 2002 National Geographic survey, young men answer more questions correctly than young women do, despite both groups having very similar education levels and recent Internet access. Women place more importance on Internet and foreign language skills, but they say they know “less” than average about geography (45%, vs. 36% of men).

From the total of 53 factual questions, men got an average of 30.2 answers right, versus 27.0 correct for women. Looking at specific types of questions, there is no significant difference between women's and men's performance on questions requiring map reading skills, and they give similar answers – both right and wrong ones – on a majority of the factual questions. Yet men score better on matching countries with their continent, and on finding countries on the Asia, Middle East and world maps. For instance, 17% of men get all four countries included in this survey on the Middle East map right, compared to 11% of women.

International Travel and Language Skills Matter

Three in ten (30%) young adults have been abroad at least once in the past three years. These international travelers are also more likely than the average to have traveled frequently (5+ times) within the U.S. (28%), to have at least some college experience (61%), and to be a full-time student (43%). This experience and interest in other countries and cultures appear related to geographic literacy, as travelers get an above-average 31.1 questions correct.

Recent Family Immigration Affects Results

Young adults who are either the children of immigrants or immigrants to the U.S. themselves tend to answer fewer questions correctly, compared to respondents whose families have been in the country longer. Young adults who immigrated and first-generation Americans get an average of 25.1 questions correct, compared to 29.5 correct answers among later-generation residents. Yet new and first-generation residents also show different priorities – not surprisingly, they are more likely to profess fluency in second languages (74%, vs. 28% of later-generation Americans), and they place greater importance on the value of speaking foreign languages in today's world (25%, compared to 12% of later generation Americans).